Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

MELLO STAPLETON

Communications Specialist, Air Force, World War II
Air Inspector, Air Force, Korean War

1994

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168

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168

Stapleton, Mello, (1919-2006). Oral History Interview, 1994.
User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 105 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 105 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.
Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).
Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Mello "Mel" Stapleton, a North Lake, Wisconsin native, discusses his career with the Army Air Force including service with the 11th Bomb Group, 431st Bomb Squad in World War II and with the Air Inspector's Office in Kunsan during the Korean War. Stapleton cites the Depression as a major reason for volunteering in 1939 and mentions using the rifle range at Camp Williams (Wisconsin) during previous training with the Wisconsin National Guard Reserves. He describes the unstructured Army Air Corps basic training he received at Chanute Field (Illinois), being rejected from pilot school due to having astigmatism, and his first duties dealing with primitive communications equipment in the Signal Corps. Shipped to Hawaii, Stapleton tells of his ship being quarantined for measles and describes the five months spent on board. Stationed at Hickam Field (Hawaii), he speaks about living in tents while the barracks was being built, his duties, available recreation, and a lack of rivalry between service branches. He recalls in detail the attack on Pearl Harbor. At an all-night beach party the night before, he talks about the Hickam Field's dining hall being destroyed, everyone running to get guns, shooting at Japanese planes, the devastation of the barracks, and the loss of most airplanes on the islands. Stapleton describes regrouping after the attack, repairing airplanes, and eating lots of Spam because all the cooks had been killed. He describes flying B17Es with the 11th Bomb Group at the Battle of Midway and, based on Espiritu Santo (South Pacific), doing bombing runs at Guadalcanal. He mentions flying a combat mission to New Guinea to relieve the 32nd Division on Christmas Eve. Stapleton describes the crew of "Knucklehead", his plane, and, after R&R in New Zealand, discovering that their bombardier had committed suicide. After fifty-five missions, he states they had orders to go home but had to hitch-hike back on a Dutch freighter. Stapleton mentions getting married and training crews at Scotts Bluff (Nebraska), Caspar (Wyoming), and Albuquerque (New Mexico). He talks about reenlisting and duties as Communication Chief at Chanute Field (Illinois). After the Korean War began, he speaks of nearly getting an assignment for him and his family at Nagoya (Japan), but being transferred last-minute to the Air Inspector's Office in Kunsan (Korea) without his family. Stapleton describes Korea as a desolate country and explains he was restricted to Kunsan Air Base for his entire year there. He describes retiring at Truax Field in 1962, being a member of the Pear Harbor Survivors Association, attending 11th Bomber Group reunions, being legislative chair for VFW post 8483, lobbying for veteran benefits, and belonging to the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups as well as the Cameral Club. Stapleton briefly

talks about his VFW post's involvement in politics, including the controversy over the Smithsonian's *Enola Gay* exhibit, the immigration of Russian soldiers from the Baltic states, and homeless Vietnam and World War II veterans.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1994.
Transcribed by Joanna D. Glenn, WDVA Staff, 1997.
Transcription edited by Channing Welch, 2008.
Transcript corrected by Katy Marty, 2008.
Abstract by Susan Krueger, 2009.

Interview Transcript:

Mark: Today's date is November 17, 1994. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Mel Stapleton of Madison, a World War II veteran of the U.S. Air Force. Good morning, Mr. Stapleton, how are you?

Mel: Good morning, Mark. Good to be here.

Mark: Well, on this questionnaire that I have, perhaps we can just start out with some of the top questions here. Perhaps tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your upbringing.

Mel: I was born March 1, 1919 in North Lake, Wisconsin.

Mark: Now, where is that?

Mel: Down in the Hartland-Oconomowoc area.

Mark: In the Kettle Moraine area?

Mel: Kettle Moraine country, yup, and I grew up there, went to Oconomowoc High School, went to the local schools in North Lake, graduated from Oconomowoc High School in 1936 and stayed around the North Lake area essentially until I went into service in 1939.

Mark: I see. Now this was in the midst of the Depression when you graduated high school.

Mel: Yes, it was.

Mark: Did that affect you and your family much? It affected some people more than others.

Mel: We were very lucky, my father had owned a grocery store in a small town. I think he smelled the Depression coming. There were ten children in my family and I think he knew something was going to break so he bought a farm outside of North Lake, Wisconsin and during the Depression at least we had eggs and chickens and milk and so forth. So, to that extent we were very lucky to have that farm to support that big family.

Mark: I see. Now this is all suburban area now. I assume it was much different back in the '30's, the whole Oconomowoc area. If you drive through there today it's a lot of housing developments ---

Mel: No. North Lake is still a village of 300 population.

Mark: It must be out of the way, cause I ---

Mel: The family farm, my great-great grandfather came from Ireland and I have a copy of the 1950 [note: he probably means 1850 census] census where he owned the farm and his buildings valued at 500 dollars. 500 dollars for the whole 160 acres. That particular farm was turned into a suburban development about ten years ago, into a suburban development where you had to buy five acres. Now the value of the land of that 160 acres is 1.8 million dollars. I wish someone in the family had kept it in the family.

Mark: It's amazing isn't it? So you went to the service in 1939. I'm interested in what prompted you to join the military at this time. Was it an economic decision, was it political, I mean things were going on in Europe at the time.

Mel: It was the economics of the end of the Depression. My father and mother put my two oldest siblings, brother and sister, through Milwaukee State Teacher's College, but I was the fifth kid down the road and it was apparent to me that unless something happened, in largesse, that there was not going to be a college education for me. I was always interested in airplanes, had built models of airplanes and World War I air planes as early as I can remember. And I was very fascinated by radio and communications. So, I volunteered in 1939 to join the service at Chanute Field, Illinois which had airplanes and radios, so it was not only economic but it was my own sense of culture.

Mark: I see. Was this before Hitler invaded Poland by some chance?

Mel: Let me see. Oh, boy. That's fifty some years ago. I think, yes, it was before Hitler invaded Poland. I remember talking to my dad when I went overseas to Hawaii in 1940. He said, "What do you think of the possibility of war?" I think it was just at that time Hitler invaded Poland in early 1940. My sense of history is not that accurate, but I think it was right about that ---. At any rate, I enlisted well before even any sense—well, Hitler and the Nazis were burning books in Germany and Austria and so forth—but I think it was even before he invaded Czechoslovakia.

Mark: I see. So what was your training like in the Army Air Force at this time? Was it rigorous, was it full of discipline, or what would you describe ---

Mel: Basic military training was far and away from where we are today. Today it's very structured and so forth. Back in those days, we had a 1st Sergeant who did most of the training and it was mostly getting to know your left foot from your right foot and doing a little marching. In the Air Force particularly, we had very little, I don't think we even had a rifle range or gunnery training and

so forth. But, preceding that in 1935 and 1936, I was in the Wisconsin National Guard and at age fifteen I was firing on the rifle range at Camp McCoy. Camp Douglas. Camp Williams, yeah. So, I had a lot of basic military training - infantry type - before I even got to the Air Force so I was probably much better off as a recruit in the Air Force in 1939 than a lot of guys that had had no National Guard training and so forth.

Mark: Your specialized skill was in communications?

Mel: Um huh.

Mark: Perhaps describe a little bit what your duties were and what your training was for those ---

Mel: Well, I indicated before that I had a large interest in radio and so forth and in late 1939, I applied for Pilot Training School at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas—Randolph Field, Texas—and there were two things. I made the written test and they sent me to Randolph and some flight surgeon said, "Who sent you down here? You can't see worth a damn!" I had double astigmatism and there were two things that you absolutely could not have as a pilot, one was flat feet, I never understood that one, the double astigmatism I could understand that. So, they sent me back to Chanute and they said, "What do you want to do?" I said, "Communications," and because it was my second-best love and so I went on to retire from the Air Force and I was in communications, both ground and air and in radar and was just getting into the computer age when I retired.

Mark: In the years before Pearl Harbor, what sort of equipment did you have? And what would your duties have been? Was it for fighters or for bombers? Or what sort of communications were you doing?

Mel: My first business, it was the old Signal Corps. You may know that in World War I the airplanes were really part of the Signal Corps and although in 1939 I was in the U.S. Army Air Corps, my first duties were climbing telephone poles for stringing lines and getting shocked by 1918-1919 type of equipment. But then when things started to heat up, we had very ancient communications systems. For air to ground I think if we could communicate 200 miles I think we were very lucky. Our command sets are short-range voice communications, if we could communicate seventy miles we were lucky and it was pretty primitive equipment largely carried over from not from World War I but there was some slowed development from between the wars, but it was no Department of Defense super-budget in those days and there was a lot of antagonism about building up an Army and Air Force and Navy. It was a, what's the word, obstructionist, obstructing the military so we were very lucky to have what we had to work with in those primitive days.

Mark: When did you go overseas?

Mel: From March to September of 1940, March to September.

Mark: And you went to Hawaii right away?

Mel: Hawaii, right away. That March to December business you might be interested in that.

Mark: I am interested. I'm interested in what it was like for GIs before Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Was it the paradise you expected or ---?

Mel: Well, in the first place, in the 1930's and 1940, we had no bases in Europe. None. So everybody that went overseas either went to Panama, Hawaii, Philippines or Alaska. The way it worked in those days, anybody that shipped out from any base east of the Mississippi River went by train to Brooklyn Army Base and then shipped out by ship through the Panama Canal up to Angel Island in San Francisco and then off to the Philippines or Hawaii or Alaska. Anybody west of the Mississippi River went directly to Presidio in San Francisco and then from there. But the reason it took from March until September to get to Hawaii was when we were going through the Panama Canal, someone got the measles and our ship took us up to Angel Island, California and we were quarantined there until the USS Leonard Wood went to the Philippines, back to Frisco, back to Panama, back to New York, back to San Francisco and we caught it on the second round. So it took us from March to September to get to Hawaii.

Mark: That sounds like an awful long story. What did you do on the ship to occupy yourselves?

Mel: Played poker.

Mark: Did you lose much money?

Mel: No, I was a pretty lucky guy. I made more money coming back on the ship from Korea than I did going to Hawaii. That was a different ball game.

Mark: Now, these are a lot of Army guys. Now, on the ship there are a lot of Army guys. Was there much problems with seasickness and that sort of thing? Did it take you a while to get your sea legs as they say?

Mel: Oh, oh boy! When we shipped out of New York, Brooklyn Army Base, we were going through Cape Hatteras off the coast of North Carolina and we hit a big storm and fortunately for me, I was on KP, "kitchen police", down in the

bowels of the ship, but the people that were up close to deck, it was a wild storm so there was no one on deck, but the people that were up there could not stand that rolling and tossing and everybody was seasick. It was just awful. I was very fortunate, I was down below and didn't get sick.

Mark: What kind of accommodations did you have on this ship? Was it a room with six bunks in it?

Mel: Yeah. A great big room with 20-30 bunks two feet wide, ladders, the bunks were probably four or five, I would say, bunks deep—not very accommodating.

Mark: So you finally got to Hawaii then in September you said? Between the time that you got there and the attack on Pearl Harbor perhaps you could describe a little bit about your duties and what it was like to be a young GI. I don't know if GI was used at the time.

Mel: Well, I was stationed at Hickam Field which is just adjacent to Pearl Harbor. As a matter of fact, all there is is a barbed wire fence separating Hickam Field and Pearl Harbor. Hickam Field was destined to be the pearl of the Air Force in Hawaii. It was really just being built. For a long time we lived in tents while they completed the barracks, the big barracks that would eventually hold 3,600 people all in one building. So, we lived in tents and each squadron had their own wooden mess hall, each squadron had their own cooks, each squadron had their own airplanes, we had B18's, two-engine bombers that were built in 1935 and '36. Ninety miles per hour full tilt and so we took care of those air planes and I took care of, we had a communications section of about five men, with a Section Chief and we took care of those airplanes, stringing antennas, taking care of the airplanes. We got up every morning for calisthenics, went to breakfast, changed into our fatigue work clothes, coveralls, and went to work. Went back to the squadron mess hall for lunch and went back to work and then a little later after we got into the barracks and got to know each others' squadron people and friends, we did a lot of golfing, a lot of going down to the beaches in Waikiki and so forth. We had a pretty good social life, not much money. I bought a set of golf clubs over there, woods and the irons for thirty dollars, but it took me two months to pay for it, (laughs) 'cause we were drawing thirty dollars a month.

Mark: That doesn't sound like a lot. Did you need a lot of money to have a good time? 'Cause you know to go to Hawaii today, I'm told—I've never been there—it's very, very expensive.

Mel: Sure, sure. No, five of us ganged up and bought an old beat up 1932 Buick, I think, and we'd go down to the beaches and things. Sometimes we'd steal

some 90 octane gas from the airport and use those kinds of resources and we had a lot of fun, cheaply.

Mark: Now, Hawaii is a place where there is not only Army and Army Air Force, but lots of Navy, I suppose Marines too. I'm wondering if you could perhaps comment on inter-service rivalry. Was there much of that? Did you associate much with the Navy guys? Was there rivalry or ---

Mel: I wouldn't say rivalry; it was togetherness in the services. The YMCA hotel in downtown Honolulu was where all the buses wound up from Pearl Harbor, from Hickam Field, from the Marine bases and once in a while the tough Marines would like to muscle their way in but the services pretty much stuck to themselves, Navy guys went with Navy guys and so forth. There was a big, oh boy, Fort --- up in the middle of Oahu in the island, there was a big, big, big Army base ---

Mark: Schofield Barracks?

Mel: Schofield Barracks, yeah thank you, which was made famous by Burt Lancaster's movie *From Here to Eternity*. That was a very good movie showing what went on before the war and the start of the war. It's a very good historical reference.

Mark: So, I suppose we're up to the actual Pearl Harbor attack now. In the days before, in the weeks or even months, I suppose did you have any inkling that an attack like that was going to happen? Did you have any signs, intelligence?

Mel: We, of course the enlisted men were the lower category of humanity (laughs) and we had to depend on what the big whips were doing and of course we knew what was going on in Europe and of course we knew that Churchill was trying to get the United States involved in the war, but I think there was a general feeling that if we ever got into a war with Japan, we'd whip 'em in two weeks, you know. We were on alerts, but I think they were half-hearted alerts and I think General Short and General Kimmel, General Kimmel in charge of the Navy, General Short in charge of Army including the Air Corps, I think they were left out of something and I think they shouldn't have been court marshaled and dismissed from service because I don't think there was enough intelligence back and forth between Washington and Hawaii and of course, the attack itself was a master success. Absolutely. But here we were, we had two Japanese prime ministers in Washington negotiating for peace and the Japanese fleet had been steaming toward Hawaii for two or three weeks already, taking a position 200 miles north of Hawaii and I don't know if anybody ever explored this very much but General Billy Mitchell of the US Army Air Corps, of the US Signal Corps in World War I, he was from Milwaukee and he was a great advocate of bombing by airplane. Well, now

you can imagine in 1918 they were mostly wire and paper airplanes, but he advocated that someday, the Air Corps bomber would play a big role in the services of the United States and he wrote a book. He wrote a thesis from one of his air war college things that said, "If I were to attack a place, I would attack Pearl Harbor in Hawaii at 8:00 o'clock in the morning, on a Sunday morning, to take out the Navy."

Mark: Now do you suppose the Japanese read the same book?

Mel: I'm sure they did. I'm sure they read Billy Mitchell's book. 'Cause it was just too close.

Mark: So, when the actual attack started where were you? Were you sleeping or you up already on duty or in church on Sunday morning?

Mel: Just coming in off of a beach party, an all night beach party, but I had changed clothes and gotten into a winter uniform consisting of a khaki shirt and wool pants, olive drab pants, getting ready to go to church. I mentioned before that 3,600 man barracks. The attack is still controversial but some people say the attack hit Hickam Field at about five minutes after eight. The first bombing in Pearl Harbor was 7:55. We were just getting ready to go to breakfast before church, not in the mess hall but down to the cafeteria or whatever. Had that attack happened one hour earlier, a large portion of those 3,600 men would be in breakfast in the mess hall and that mess hall took a direct hit and we would have lost thousands of men an hour earlier. So we didn't get to go to breakfast and we didn't get to go to church. We all bailed out of the barracks. It was a three-story barracks consisting of 3-6-9-12 wings of barracks, was three stories deep and whoever was in the barracks it was no place to be because, well, everybody's intention was to get to the flight line and get any kind of a gun. We had rifles and pistols and some machine guns in the airplanes, largely with no ammunition and I recall that I was running from the barracks to the flight line which is approximately 200 yards and I was running through water and my shoes were full of water so I knelt down to get rid of the shoes, big garrison shoes, high tops, and I see a copy of, a November issue of Collier magazine, which was a very popular – it was similar to People magazine of today and the front cover had the story "Pearl Harbor is Impregnable" by Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, the top man in the Navy. "Pearl Harbor is impregnable." Not so that day. So we continued, fled to the flight line and of course, the armament chief in charge of the rifles and pistols and so forth, he wanted everybody to sign a hand receipt before (laughs) he handed out a gun. It was typical of the dumbness of - how dumb can you get!

Mark: I assume he didn't succeed in getting his hand receipts.

Mel: No, he did not! Assorted other people just started ripping guns and so forth. So we did manage to round up a machine gun and because the radio shack that I worked in was right next to the armament shack, and several friends of mine and I took that thing, which was on a tripod and you had a kind of a circle around your back to lean up against and we did get it out on the parade ground and so we started shooting and there were enough things to shoot at. There had been estimates that, oh I think from 220 to 350 airplanes came in from the aircraft carriers of Japan. So we had enough things to shoot at. The problem with the Navy, they had training ammunition in their guns also, which went up to about 10,000 feet as I recall. I think the Japanese knew that. They flew at 10,200 feet and the training ammunition would just drop in the ocean, couldn't get 'em. We did shoot down between the Army and the Navy, something in the neighborhood of thirty-five or forty-five planes, one of which was destined to hit the oil tanks at Pearl Harbor, probably several, and never did. Had they done that, there would have been more devastation in the harbor than there was. One of which was supposed to have hit our fuel depot on Hickam Field and never did, so we were lucky there.

Mark: Now at Hickam Field, the main target there were the airplanes that were there --- is that right?

Mel: Sure.

Mark: Were you near where the airplanes were on the tarmac?

Mel: Oh ya, sure. Fifty feet away.

Mark: What kind of toll did they take on the airplanes? Did they get most of them, get all of them?

Mel: Let me go back to Wheeler Field was the fighter base up in the central part of the island, pretty close to Schofield Barracks. Their airplanes, P40s and P36s were to wind up in duck line and just right out on the tarmac and they hit them, I think, before us because they wanted to eradicate that fighter capability and it made an absolute total, total wipeout of the fighter planes at Wheeler Field, total. Ours fared no better.

Mark: At Hickam what kind of planes did you have?

Mel: B17s. B17Ds which was a big difference because the D model did not have a tail gunner, the E, which came in during the attack, I think it was thirteen airplanes came in from California during the attack, they were E models and they did have a tail gunner position. But our flight line was totally decimated. Totally. A couple of hangers, well they were after the airplane, they didn't try to wipe out the hangers because they were armament shops, radio shops, and

operations. But there were airplanes in them and many of the hangers did get bombed, but we had one hanger that had two airplanes in it that did not get bombed and that will be significant later because the next morning we used those two airplanes on December 8th to go try to find the Japanese fleet. But those thirteen airplanes that were coming in from California came in right smack in the middle of the attack and there they were, low on gas, no armament because they needed the lightness of the airplane to even fly that far. That was a long distance in those days. No armament and they didn't know what was going on and so the control tower, before it went out of business, said, "We are under attack. Scatter. Try Bellows Field, try-" and named a couple of other fields. One landed on the golf course, one landed up a mountain, they were scattered all over the island, I think. One of them cracked up at Kaneohe Marine Base, but we largely lost those thirteen airplanes. And of course after the war started, after Pearl Harbor, what were you going to do with airplanes in that planning phase. Now we are at war. Who is going to attack who and where and it was the business of regrouping and saying, "What do we do with our forces now?" And what we did, we immediately learned that you don't stack up your airplanes in one place on one big field. So the Seabees and the Army Engineers built temporary fields all over the islands, including the big island, the island of Hawaii, but Oahu was still the main island for military operations. So, we scattered. Our squadron went out to the north tip of the island, took our B17s, fixed them up, worked on them, got new airplanes, scrapped the old beat up ones and continued.

Mark: Did you have many airplanes to work with after the attack? Doesn't sound like it.

Mel: No. We didn't, but if the tail was fired off of one airplane, we had a bunch of damned good mechanics in those days. They were monkey wrench and screwdriver mechanics and they would take an engine off of one airplane and put it on one that got shot up and they were resourceful people and they were stung by the fact that their airplane and crew chief, his airplane was like his toy, and he would steal an engine from another airplane overnight if he could get his airplane back in the air. So, they were a very jealous bunch of people and each squadron was jealous of their own integrity and what they would do and could do. We patched them up and, of course, you know the story about the engineering about the six or seven battleships that were sunk in Pearl Harbor. Six months later, at the Battle of Midway, many of those ships that were sunk in Pearl Harbor were working in the Battle of Midway. It was a tremendous effort. I don't know how many thousands of sheet metal workers and steel workers and so forth they imported from the United States to restore that fleet.

Mark: It sounds to me like it was a very busy place after the attack.

Mel: Well, Pearl Harbor, there was an estimate that they had something in the neighborhood of 35,000 sailors at Pearl Harbor at the time of the attack. Interestingly enough, I went back to the 50th reunion of Pearl Harbor in 1991 and the Pearl Harbors Survivors Association said that we have 7,000 back here for the 50th reunion. I thought that was pretty significant. Of course, sailors lie a lot!

Mark: Not airmen.

Mel: No! No! But if the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association did get 7,000 of those 35,000 troopers back there, that was a significant number and it looked like 7,000. But we were all lumped together. I'm a Pearl Harbor survivor, I wear a Pearl Harbor Survivor cap. Anybody that was on or near the island qualifies to be a Pearl Harbor Survivor. Army, Air Force and Navy are all Pearl Harbor Survivors lumped into one group. I suppose we were pretty lucky to get 7,000 people.

Mark: So in the days after the attack, what specifically were you doing in this regrouping effort?

Mel: Well in the first place, that 3,600-man barracks was hit hard structurally. There were fires in the barracks and there were sagging—I said before it was a three-story barracks—sagging structures so we couldn't even use the barracks at all. A bad feature was that, I said before that the mess hall got hit, and on Sunday morning, all the squadrons grouped there, Mess Sergeants and cooks into the big dining room. That kitchen took a direct hit on Sunday morning and killed practically every cook on Hickam Field. So, after the attack, I don't know what we did for the first two days. I really don't. There was some business about sandbagging something, but I think we sandbagged the wrong building (laughs). Obviously, communications was a big thing, operations, we didn't know what we were going to operate with and who we were going to call on the communications equipment, but saved the operations and the communications and so we did a lot of sandbagging, we went back to tents, lived in tents, immediately started eating out of mess kits.

Mark: The old C rations or K rations or something like that?

Mel: I don't think we had C and K then, I don't think so. It was Spam. Spam was the thing (laughs). Spam in the morning, Spam for lunch, and Spam for dinner. Scrambled eggs, biscuits if you had a cook to bake them, and everybody was raiding cooks too, I'll tell you. So we just were in a waiting game while we rebuilt our planes. Truthfully, we didn't accomplish an awful lot, I don't think. I don't know what we accomplished in the first two months of the war. Then there started to dribble in stories about supposedly Japan wanted to attack again and what would happen if they got away with it the

first time, they'll surely try it again. And then rumors started talking about bombing the United States, California and so forth and even Midway. So, Intelligence said and eventually they broke the code of the Japanese Navy, and knew that they were coming in for an attack on Midway and it was the turning point of the war because we had broken that code, they had four carriers in the Midway fleet and we had three. They didn't know anything about our three, didn't know where they were and so forth, but we knew where their four were. That might be getting ahead of your story. Just to recap, it was a business of, I don't think we did much the first two months after Pearl Harbor but then we knew that we had to prepare because we were in war. We had to prepare for a battle somewhere and then the Midway thing developed and we had the 11th Bomb Group, we now had the B17E's with the tail turret and we had four squadrons and the 11th Bomb Group all equipped with new B17E's and we went out to Midway. The battle was June 3, 4, 5 and 6, as I recall and we got there on the first and second and because we were long range bombers, we went on observation missions. It was a Navy PBY, two-engine flying boat, that first made contact, or saw that the Japanese fleet was coming in. They sent us out in a kind of a pie shape formation in all of our bombers as an observation unit to find the Japanese fleet. And that may have been our biggest thing to do in this Battle of Midway was to locate that fleet. Then our carriers were coming in from California and consolidated their fighter and bomber actions **[End of Tape 1, side A]** and took out the Japanese fleet. Took out all four carriers. We lost one, I think it was the Lexington, but it was a total annihilation of - there were battleships, cruisers, heavy cruisers, destroyers and the four battleships and it was clearly, as depicted by some people, the turning point of the Pacific war. There we were in the heavy bombers that Billy Mitchell had described in 1924, but we truthfully didn't have much in spite of the fact that we had the famous Nordon bomb site. We had not had much experience in bombing from high altitude on moving targets and truthfully, we took out a couple of cruisers and hit one of the carriers, but high altitude bombing on a moving target in water is a very difficult thing to do.

Mark: I'm sure it is. Now you were how high?

Mel: 30,000 feet. Long range bombing as previously suggested was on a sitting target, targets of Berlin or wherever, but when you try to hit a circling battleship who is frantically trying to keep out of harm's way, its a tough thing to hit. In spite of that we -- I flew, I was a communication-radio gunner.

Mark: Where would that be on the aircraft?

Mel: The radio position, I had a desk and all my radio equipment around me, right back of the bomb bay. Midway back in the ship, and then when you got into battle, you turn - you forgot about communications and engineering and so

forth, and everybody became gunners except the pilot and co-pilot, even the navigator and the bombardier were gunners. We had two jobs on the airplane. I flew, I think, it was five missions. I don't recall - maybe two missions a day. They were not long missions but because by this time the Japanese were close enough to reach easily.

Mark: Did you take any losses during the Battle of Midway?

Mel: We lost four airplanes out of the thirteen, one Marine torpedo squadron was hit and lost every one of their airplanes. There was one survivor. He is still alive today - Ensign Gay - he comes up to EAA, Experimental Aircraft Association every year.

Mark: The name sounds familiar - maybe that's why.

Mel: Ensign Gay, the only survivor of that torpedo squadron.

Mark: The victory at Midway - I assume that was good for morale? Is that a dumb question?

Mel: Well, I think like after the Pearl Harbor attack, certainly we in the Air Force, Air Corps, weren't, I don't think we knew that we sunk four Japanese ships. Midway is a pretty small island and so we all came back to Hawaii and dispersed to our airfields and I suppose it was some time before we got the word that we had won as big as we had. I don't think it was a time of rejoicing or "We won the war!" or "We won the battle!" or something because there was obviously going to be other battles. I'm sure the Navy was very happy and the Navy Department back in Washington knew that they had won a gigantic battle. I don't think the significance of winning that battle would even be known until the Battle of the Coral Sea when sometime later, when the absence of those four Japanese aircraft carriers made it a hell of a lot easier to win that battle. So you take those wins with a grain of salt, you beat them but "What do we do next?" Then that was in early June and we only had one month to put some airplanes back together and then came the next rumbling which was Guadalcanal. Guadalcanal is down in the Solomon Islands, a long string of islands east of New Guinea, north of Fiji, south of Guam and the Japanese owned, had taken over Guadalcanal which was the long island probably as long as the state of Wisconsin but half as wide, and the Japanese had -- Guadalcanal was coconut plantations owned by the French and the Japanese invaded there. There were probably three to five Frenchmen on the island and all the rest of them were natives so they went ashore in row boats and took over the island. The purpose of taking over Guadalcanal was to make a two-pronged attack, one from New Guinea, and the Japanese had contained New Guinea, and the other from Guadalcanal to attack Australia and it was clearly, they had given up any ideas of eastern expansion to

Midway, Hawaii, California by this time. The prongs of New Guinea and Guadalcanal would put them in a great position to attack and take over Australia which was decimated manpower-wise by this time because the Australians and the New Zealanders were fighting the war in Libya - Rommel and the deserts of Africa. Australia and New Zealand were terribly drained of manpower. Of course, they had some and they kept their defensive forces, but their offensive forces were fighting Rommel in Africa. So, the United States decided that Guadalcanal as a first offensive target, they would take on the Japanese. They had already taken over New Guinea and Guadalcanal and our group flew down in July from Hawaii down to Christmas Island, Canton Island where we refueled and then finally made it to Fiji and we were stationed at Fiji for a month and a half or something like that while the Seabees were - there were some islands up range that we granted in?? flying all the way from Fiji to Guadalcanal. The Navy Seabees were building some runways up on the Espiritu Santo and some closer places. So the attack on Guadalcanal by the 1st and 2nd Marine Infantry Divisions took place on August 8. On August 4, our B17's flying out of Espiritu Santo and I think the 11th Bomb Group, thirteen to fifteen airplanes, we flew in on August 4,5,6 and 7th, treetop level and bombed with 110 pound personnel bombs and took out a tremendous number of Japanese preparatory to the 1st and 2nd Marines assaulting the island. This is the first World War II off-shore invasion. It was the first offensive. They didn't know, the Marines, how well those landing ship tanks would work, what kind of soil or rock or - of course that's difficult in any battle. That was the first offensive battle of the war and it was totally a testing ground of, under the most rigorous conditions. There were people shooting at you.

Mark: How do you think you fared?

Mel: We, the Air Force, I don't think we lost an airplane. Because we were extremely low level and then we'd dump our bombs and fly back to Espiritu Santo. The Marines had a fairly easy time getting ashore. I don't know whether, but I think we had something to do with it. I think we bombed a lot of personnel. As a matter of fact, our 11th Bomb Group got a Distinguished Unit Citation from the United States Navy for those four days of preparatory.

Mark: So, at Guadalcanal you participated in the preparatory bombing for the invasion and what did you do after the invasion?

Mel: I got fifty-five combat missions which is an awful lot. It's obvious that we secured the island. The Marines did a magnificent job and secured the island and immediately built an airfield. Henderson Army Airfield where we moved the B17's to from Espiritu Santo and we continued, I repeat again, it was the first offensive of the Pacific. The 32nd Division from Wisconsin and Michigan were having a hell of a time over in New Guinea. They tried to

make that the first offensive and they kept getting knocked back by the Japanese and I will never forget the longest night of my life. At 4:00 in the afternoon we took off from Espiritu Santo and we had put extra gas tanks in our airplanes and that same thirteen or fifteen airplanes flew from Espiritu Santo starting at 4:00 in the afternoon and we got to New Guinea at midnight and unloaded our personnel bombs on the Japanese who were bearing down on the 32nd Division from Wisconsin. And we pretty well knocked them out, knocked them back anyway so the 32nd could -- But that was Christmas Eve, 1942 and then to fly back from there, very weary, long eighteen hours in the air, got home in time for Christmas dinner. Long night.

Mark: I'm curious. Did you fly the same plane and the same crew with Midway that you had at Guadalcanal? Did you have a name for your plane?

Mel: Knucklehead.

Mark: How'd you come up with that one?

Mel: Our pilot was something of a knucklehead in flying school and the co-pilot was in the same class with him and so he named the airplane.

Mark: I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the crew. Where they all came from, how you all got along with each other and that sort of thing.

Mel: As a crew, we had to work together. Some guys didn't like one another for personal reasons or what have you. Our bombardier, let me see, after Guadalcanal in November of '42 we had flown twenty-five bombing missions, most of the group had, but our crew had, most of the squadrons had. And so they sent us on R&R, rest and recreation to New Zealand and we were down there a week and a half having a great time, just great to be out of the war. So the bombardier was a particular friend of mine because I had met him years before when I had washed out of the, when I never got into pilot school and he was there and he washed out. But he became a bombardier so I had known him—can't think of his name—but he was a bombardier on our crew and we were close friends. We got ready to come home from that R&R in New Zealand and Pilot Westmond said, "Stape, you go find the bombardier." He was in a hotel room and he had blown his brains out. He said, "I will not go back go war." There is a reason for that too. The bombardier is right in the front of the airplane. Right smack in front. Any opposing fire always shot at the crew, the pilot, co-pilot and the bombardier was right in line of sight to get hit first. We lost a lot of bombardiers that way. The crew consisted of ten people: pilot, co-pilot, bombardier, navigator—the four commissioned officers—and six enlisted men: the engineer, radio operator, assistant operator, two side gunners and a tail gunner-ball turret gunner. The ball turrets dropped down underneath the plane and swiveled and turned. But we

all became gunners when you're in battle. So, we had between the combination of Midway and two trips out of Hawaii the day after Pearl Harbor and Guadalcanal and the upper Solomons, we had fought those twenty-five missions up to November and then, obviously, the war didn't stop at Guadalcanal, as long as we were on the offensive we'd take on Buku Passage, northern Solomons. All of the islands in preparation for the offensive.

Mark: And in these missions your task was again to, were they preparatory for invasion?

Mel: Preparatory. Obviously. High level bombing, sometimes low level bombing, sometimes skip bombing, always pretty well preparatory to the invasion fleets and as you probably know, the Memphis Belle was a story about an airplane crew that was the first crew to make their twenty-five missions and go home. That was in England. We had no rules like that in the South Pacific. Rules of War had not yet been established and so we flew, I flew fifty-five bombing missions. They did know enough to say that after twenty-five missions you get an air medal and after fifty missions you get another air medal, so I have two air medals. But I guess maybe our airplanes were wearing out and our crews were certainly worn out, living in tents right on the equator. Replacement crews were coming, but slowly in the Pacific area because they were building up in England for the big war and we had to get replacement airplanes. Those Pratton-Whitney engines can only go so long and so we turned all of our crews from the 11th Bombing Group and pretty much replaced us with either new B17's or B24's, that's a liberator which was a longer range airplane, and pretty much replaced by the 5th Bombing Group which was also out of Hawaii, but I think they lost all their airplanes at Pearl Harbor and were pretty ineffective for a long time. So, one bomb group went through Midway, and the initial stages of Guadalcanal and we were relieved. I got back to the States – well that fifty-five missions, after the twenty-five took us to New Zealand, continued until March of 1943. Then we got orders to go home and no way to get there (laughs). So, a bunch of us made our way over to Fiji Island which was a pretty big port by this time, and hitch-hiked with a Dutch freighter back to the United States (laughs).

Mark: I want to back-track a little bit. It seems to me at Espiritu Santo is one of the places where Michener's *South Pacific* takes place. I'm interested in what you did for recreation and free time and that sort of thing while you were in the South Pacific. Was the novel accurate? Or, what was your experience there?

Mel: It was a desolate, desolate island. All it was was coconut trees. It was owned by the French and very few Frenchmen on the island. It was mostly the Bula Bulas as we called them, the natives. Absolutely no recreational thing. We did go wild boar hunting and ducked the pythons or snakes or boa constrictors that could drop out of a coconut tree and nail you before you knew what

happened and I had seen that happen to the pigs, to the wild boars more than once. There were - we couldn't swim on those beautiful beaches, I don't remember whether Michener told about the poisonous snakes, the Coral snakes. Absolutely gorgeous beaches, I'd love to go back again and may someday.

Mark: Were there nurses and that sort of thing? Michener had the men and the women in the beach-house kind of thing.

Mel: Well there was - *From Here to Eternity*, Burt Lancaster and, was she, Deborah Kerr. There were occasional stories of that kind, but they were very few and far between. Enlisted people stayed with enlisted people, officers with officers. At Espiritu Santo we had a medical detachment, obviously. I don't think we had any nurses in our group. Maybe the Marines and Navy troops did, but that's all fiction and people are fighting wars and getting themselves ready for war and so if you go out and shoot a wild boar or pot shot at a python or boa constrictor and you can't swim in that beautiful ocean because of poisonous Coral snakes, you pretty much do your business of getting ready. If you can get a hot shower working, that's a very important thing.

Mark: Let's move on to the States then, you came back in '43. I'm interested in what you did between your return and the end of the war.

Mel: All of us air crew members and many ground personnel were assigned to various pilot and air crew training establishments because now it was really heating up for the European war and I came back from San Francisco, went home on furlough, got married to my childhood sweetheart, we were married two weeks after I got home. We went to school together, we went to church together, we were confirmed together and before the war I said, "I'm going to leave you for a couple of years and go to Hawaii but maybe I can make enough money in the military to get married." She didn't think much of that, but anyway, we got married and I was now a Master Sergeant, which at that time was the highest enlisted grade because I had charge of airborne communications, ground communications and the newly developing radar. So I was promoted through the war. I was a Staff Sergeant when the war started and I became a Tech Sergeant and then a Master Sergeant and was assigned to Scotts Bluff, Nebraska, training ground and air crews in B24's, the Liberator which was destined for England and some of them to the South Pacific. Certainly on some of the longer runs in the South Pacific it would take a B24 because of its longer range than the B17. From '43 to '44 we moved from Scotts Bluff, Nebraska to Caspar, Wyoming because we were still training crews in B24's but they wanted to train them in more mountainous territory. Scott's Bluff, Nebraska is like Nebraska - flat! Nothing mountainous training in Nebraska, so we built an airfield up there and lost a lot of airplanes. Lost a

lot of airplanes in the mountains, communications mistakes and so forth and young people flying.

Mark: I have a note here that you were also in Selma, Alabama?

Mel: After Korea.

Mark: So when you were in the west training, was your wife able to come with you?

Mel: Ya.

Mark: So that was quite nice.

Mel: It was great. There were no housing units on any of those temporary bases but we made out quite good in local apartments and our first daughter was born Milwaukee, but while I was in Caspar, Wyoming. From there we moved south to Albuquerque and the new B29's were getting ready to hit the Japanese, but we essentially had the same communication and I think the Liberators had gone to Europe and now we're starting to accentuate again the Battle of the Pacific and so they sent us down to Albuquerque and did essentially the same thing, air and ground crew training, pilot training and came the end of the war and we are at Albuquerque. Now what do we do? By this time, I had six and a half years in the military and I was a Master Sergeant, I was on flying pay, I was making very good money. In spite of that, I think my wife got a tinge of homesickness and wanted to go home and maybe I did too. So we went home and I worked for six months for Johnson Control Company in Milwaukee where they wanted to adapt my communication and so forth training into one of their own engineer types. I was working on Navy and Air Corps radar training projects which Johnson Control was developing. Of course, with the end of the war, no contracts and I could have stayed in the civilian capacity with them, but one weekend, the newspaper ads were full of it. The war had already been over in Europe by May, 1945 and here we are now in August of 1945 and the Pacific War is over and the ads were full of it. "Master Sergeants of the Army Air Corps, Chief Petty Officers for the Navy and top soldiers of the Marines. We need you to reenlist." They had dumped everybody home from the war in Europe four months earlier, but they had an awful lot of material, equipment and so forth and no one to run the show, no one to even say, "What do I do with this stuff?" All the services recruited the top grades and I reenlisted and went to Chanute Field, IL, back home again. They said, "Oh, absolutely, if you enlist you're going overseas because that's where we need you." But they just happened to need my AFSC at Chanute Field because the guy I replaced had gone overseas. So, I lucked out there unless you think that it would have been nice to be in Europe.

Mark: Just to clarify things a little bit. You left New Mexico between the time the Germans surrendered and the time the Japanese surrendered and you were working at Johnson Controls at the time of VJ Day.

Mel: Ya. I left because I had high points. It took high points to get out of the service and I got out between VE and VJ Day and was working as a civilian.

Mark: So, at Chanute what do you do to wind down a large force like that into a more compact ---

Mel: Now instead of training air crews and pilots and so forth, it's a time of wind down and I was Communication Chief for all of Chanute Field. We didn't have squadrons, we didn't have airplane squadrons, we didn't have the continuity of crew members and squadron members, it was a training base. Chanute Field was a training base for weather and communications and engineering. So, it was really kind of a dead time because day after day we went to work, we lived on base or off base in a pretty much civilian, we went to the NCO clubs in civilian clothes, we went to the downtown restaurants and theaters in civilian clothes and it was pretty much factory type operation. Go to work, fix communications, train in communications, train new airmen. Kind of a dumb existence 'till 1951.

Mark: I got one more question before we get to Korea. I forget if I even asked it. Why did you decide to reenlist?

Mel: Because you get back with your same grade, I was a Master Sergeant. They didn't think that you'd be able to take the wife and family overseas, but it depended on where you landed. Because I was almost assured to have flying pay, as I said before, I was making good money.

Mark: Was it better than what you were making at Johnson Control?

Mel: No, probably not. Because I was a junior engineer capacity there. In spite of that, as I said before, I had 6.5 years in and I thought about going for career. Not bad to be a Master Sergeant with full flying pay. With only thirteen more years to go to retire if we keep out of war and stuff, which we did not. So I got the call to go to Korea and even in those days of that forgotten war, they said "Ya, you will be assigned to the Air Inspector's Office in Nagoya, Japan and your family can start planning to go to Japan. So we were overjoyed about that, you know. By the time I got to Japan, the Korean War was in full, full swing and headquarters, far east 5th Air Force was moved from Nagoya, Japan to Korea and there was no way that family could join you in Korea. So, I shipped directly from Japan to Korea.

Mark: Where did your family go, did they stay in Japan?

Mel: Stayed with my folks and her folks.

Mark: In Wisconsin?

Mel: In Wisconsin. Never got to Japan, no. The orders had changed in the time that it took me to get over there by boat. We were still pretty primitive even then in mass air transit. Until the Continental Air Command. or what did they call it? Material Air Command.

Mark: MAC?

Mel: MAC.

Mark: Material Airlift Command? It's something different now, back in my day it was called MAC.

Mel: Until that got highly developed, probably in your time. I went to Korea on a ship, a Victory ship from World War II. By the time I flew back we had some C5s, big airplanes that could fly some people back, but most people still came back from Korea in ships. So I was, with my rank and background, I was assigned to the Air Inspector's Office and you know what that is, but a lot of people don't. If anything went wrong, the Air Inspector was supposed to cure it. I was assigned to a bomb wing in Korea, B26's that came back from Europe and didn't know crew flying. We lost a lot of airplanes over there. The Korea tour was one year. You were in and you were out. I think that's the way they did in 'Nam too.

Mark: Right. Was Korea a different kind of war than World War II in your experience and if so, how so? And if not, well.

Mel: Yeah. In World War II we were island hopping, at least in the Pacific, always on the look for the offensive from our aspect, and in Korea, desolate country, desolate population, they were still whipping the wheat with flails, harvesting wheat. They were still pumping with water wheels, using human beings to irrigate the land, in 1952. Desolate, desolate country subject to typhoons and other violent weather, no fun, no fun. At my base, K-8 Kunsan, Korea, our problem was not so much the Chinese Communists, it was the Korean bandits, South Korean bandits who would steal everything they could from you. So, we were restricted to an eight-foot-high barbed wire base surrounding our entire base and we didn't get off of it - never for the year. There was no place to go downtown.

Mark: I'm not sure where Kunsan is.

Mel: On the west coast of the Sea of Japan. Pretty far directly south of Seoul as I recall. Southwest of Seoul on the Sea of Japan. Were you in Korea?

Mark: No. But Kunsan was a base that was active when I was in service. Probably still is.

Mel: It was a big supply base as well as being our 3rd Bomb Wing.

Mark: So what king of missions were taking place out of Kunsan?

Mel: Three-man crew, four-man crew: Pilot, co-pilot, bombardier and engineer. Didn't need any gunners in that two-engine airplane because they were fairly short-range missions. Get up, bomb and come back. I think the F86's and fighter planes did the work of protecting the bomber airplanes rather than having their own gunners aboard. **[End of tape 1, side B]** And it's -- Korea was a forgotten war. It's debatable to this day how much good was done by anybody. My personal opinion is if MacArthur had been able to chase the trainees - communists all the way to the end of the North Korea border, we would have had a considerably different world and Korea today than we do. But we didn't as a result of it.

Mark: I want to really back-track to the Pearl Harbor thing before I forget. You mentioned that you took place in two missions to find the Japanese fleet after the bombing. Did you find them, did you see them?

Mel: Obviously, no. Because they did have aircraft carriers that took their whole fleet home with fighter planes on them. In our squadron we had two-engine B18's that I mentioned sometime back, 90 mph full tilt, we had a co-pilot, pilot. Ray Story was the top gunner, I was the radio guy. We must have had a small load of bombs which would hit like a mosquito, one hundred 100 pound bombs, but our mission was to go out and find the Japanese fleet if we could. So we took off - I think he 5th Bomb Group sent out two airplanes too. In pie-shape formation so we could see where they are. I was looking out the window after we got out about the top of the pie crust and I said, "Oh, my God look at that number of ships down there!" I was convinced we found the Japanese fleet. We found them then they found us. The pilot had said, I said before I volunteered, he said, "You're going to be my radio operator on this flight." I said, "That's a hell of a way to volunteer." I said, "What happens if we find the Japanese fleet?" He said, "We will take this airplane right into the middle of the deck of the biggest carrier we can find, just dive into it 'cause we aren't going to get away. Suicide mission." Fortunately and obviously, it was not the Japanese fleet, it was the United States fleet coming from California.

Mark: Lucky for you!

Mel: Whatever carrier that was that sent up fighter planes. I'll never forget seeing that star—red, white and blue—on the side of that ship.

Mark: Getting kind of low on tape here and I just have a couple more questions I want to ask. When did you finally retire from the Air Force?

Mel: November 30, 1962, right here [Madison, Wisconsin] at Truax Field.

Mark: So your kids are Air Force brats, I guess. Was that a term that was used at the time?

Mel: Ya, sure. My oldest daughter was getting ready to retire, I had twenty-five years in with the Air Force, I was destined to go overseas. I had been here at Truax in a training mode for several years. My headquarters were in Texas and the time was up. I said, "Sure as hell if I stay here, I will get called and I will go to the Pacific again!" I'd volunteered for England, France, Spain, even Saudi Arabia - never got to Europe or any part of it. So we called it quits.

Mark: I was in Europe. I never got to the Pacific. The last area I want to cover involves veterans' organizations and that sort of thing. You mentioned earlier that you were active in the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association. Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about how you got involved with that group. How did you get in contact with these guys? Do you keep in touch with some of these guys?

Mel: Well, first of all, our 11th Bomber Group operation which was formed in Hawaii in 1940 and consists of four squadrons and all of us were part of the formation of that 11th Bomber Group and we have a reunion every year. Every 5th year, we go back to Hawaii. It is a very tight, well-managed organization and last year we were in Des Moines, IA. This year we will be in Louisville, KY and from there on, that will be '95, '96, '97 will be our last trip back to Hawaii and from there on we are considering folding it up. Because we are all getting too old, they're dropping out like flies now. If we had a thousand members in the 11th Bomber Group in 1965 that go to conventions, we probably have 150 today. That was the nucleus of veteran organizations and of course there is the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association and we interchange information, who's heading up what and Pearl Harbor Survivors Association was established, I think, in 1953 - a bunch of old birds saying "Let's get together" and so forth. I belong to the VFW.

Mark: That was my next area, the big ones like the VFW and the Legion. Did you join any of those? And, I'm interested in why if you were actively involved or one of those guys who pays the dues.

Mel: No. I am very actively involved. I am legislative chair for my VFW post, 84 and 83. I go to the Capitol, I lobby for veterans benefits. I also happen to be legislative chair for the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups. That is a pure civilian thing that consists of 130,000 senior citizens from Wisconsin.

Mark: How'd you get involved in that? Is there a connection between?

Mel: Ya. Well, not in the Coalition of Wisconsin Aging Groups, and VFW, but the same type of people belong to - they're busy people. I belong to the Cameral Club, then two months ago I was a project leader to collect $1500 to restore two Irish flags from the Civil War and two months ago, we gave Ray Boland and Zeitlin a $1500 check for the restoration of those flags. So, I'm a busy guy. I travel a lot. My wife passed away two years ago, but I have four children right here and one in Denver. I'll be driving to Denver for Thanksgiving. I keep busy.

Mark: Is that one of the reasons that you joined the VFW? I'm interested in what prompted you to join these groups like the VFW and when did you do it?

Mel: Well, I first joined another post in South Madison, 1318, but I was basically an east sider because it was close to Truax and the Truax post is more airplane oriented. There's a lot of mechanics out there and a lot of Vietnam guys, some old VFW posts have not taken well to the Vietnamers.

Mark: But your post has.

Mel: Ours has accepted because we know that we are getting very old and who's going to take over in a couple of years - literally a couple of years. So Chapter 5 of Wisconsin Vietnam Veterans is co-habitat with us in our post building and we get along great. We do a lot of projects together. We have Christmas Day and we have homeless veterans dinner at the post. We will have clothes, shoes, toys, Santa Claus, everything.

Mark: As legislative chairman what have been the most challenging issues facing veterans today?

Mel: At the national level of the VFW, I went to the Las Vegas national reunion and there were two outstanding items: the manager of the Smithsonian Institute, which is an institution that I dearly love - I've been there many times, has decided that the Enola Gay, the B29 that bombed Nagasaki in World War II, is a disrepresentative exhibit and will probably offend the Japanese people.

Mark: Oh I'm familiar with the issue. I'm working in a museum right now (Mel laughs).

Mel: So, the VFW at the National Convention sent forth at least a half dozen resolutions - restore that damn airplane and get it into the Museum! (laughs) And I think there has been some back-tracking. I think there has been some congressional input into that and I think the Enola Gay will be restored and exhibited. The other big issue: Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania up on the north east corner of the Baltic states, there were a number of Russian soldiers who had been over in that area for a long time and there is a thought that we ought to bring into the United States some 5,000 soldiers and families from Russia and the VFW just roared! We have enough Vietnam homeless veterans, we have enough World War II homeless families, let's take care of ours and not be bringing in Russian former enemies to our country. So those are the big two.

Mark: The big ones today. What about the state of benefit programs? You mentioned homelessness for example, that's a major concern at the VFW?

Mel: Absolutely. Well, your own Department of Military Affairs here, those two issues they talked about are the national ones and there is a lot of things, as you know, retraining, agent orange, that type of thing that – posts, as individual VFW posts, I'm afraid there is not enough input from the posts.

Mark: Into the Department of Veterans Affairs?

Mel: Ya. At the state level. They know about those national issues because they read the VFW national magazine. I'm not saying there is not enough communications, but the Department of Veterans Affairs and the VFW posts don't have a close enough communication to get results. However, us in the legislative field, we do get our notices from the Capitol on what veteran bills were coming up and then it's my job to make it apparent to the VFW, to the posts, what we should bargain for.

Mark: Do you find that there is enough support in the Legislature and in the public generally?

Mel: We have been very fortunate in Wisconsin because we have a lot of veterans in the Legislature and we have a lot of nonveterans that support veterans. Compare that to this month's magazine, national magazine of the VFW where it lays out in view of the upcoming change of administration and so forth, it lays out how does the veteran stack up with veteran congressmen and senators. It is very interesting that Wisconsin does not have one member of the Wisconsin Delegation, nor either senator who are veterans. Not one. So, that's something to think about. Representative Marlin Snyder is not a veteran, he's an absolute supporter of veterans. Representative Dale Boley has resigned from the Assembly, I think for age and possibly health reasons.

He was Chairman of the Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee. Changing times. But veterans had better be interested in their welfare and what the Congress and the Wisconsin Legislature can do for them.

Mark: Those cover all the things I wanted to talk about, do you have anything you'd like to add?

Mel: I can't imagine!

Mark: Thank you very much for stopping in.

[End of interview]